

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, July 26, 1881, with transcript

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL TO MABEL (Hubbard) BELL Volts Laboratory, 1221 Conn. Ave., Washington, D. C. Tuesday, July 26th, 1881. My darling:

I owe you a long letter to make up for my epistolary silence. I have telegraphed you every day as a means of easing my conscience but after all telegrams are not such satisfactory things as letters. They are to a certain extent public as they have to pass through so many hands en route to their destination. Ordinary telegrams I presume are private enough — the contents being known only to those operators who transmit and receive the message — but in the case of my telegrams to you concerning the experiments to locate the bullet in the body of the President — I have no doubt they are all discussed by the employees of the Telegraph Company — and thus run a great chance of leaking out into the public Press. I telegraphed you this morning the Induction Balance would be tried upon the person of the President this evening — and this evening I sent you a dispatch intended not for you at all — but for the employees of the Telegraph Company to the effect that “Trial of apparatus on President postponed for a few days.”

As a matter of fact preliminary experiments were made upon the person of the President this evening but the results were so uncertain that the doctors wish nothing to be said about the matter until the experiments have been repeated — so as to render the evidence of the Induction Balance as reliable as possible.

I will briefly give you a description of this eventful day.

Yesterday afternoon I arranged that the doctors should send for me when they were ready to use the Induction Balance — and from their manner I judged that it would be several days before I was wanted. I felt tired, ill, dispirited and headachy and went home to bed

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thoroughly 2 exhausted from several days and nights of hard labour. I did not wake until about eleven o'clock this morning. While at breakfast Mr. Tainter came over from the laboratory with a letter which had just arrived from the Executive Mansion.

I found it to be a note from Dr. Bliss requesting me to be at the Executive Mansion at five o'clock this evening and that the experiment would be made at six o'clock on the person of the President.

Our last opportunity for improving the apparatus had come! We set to work testing some new ideas — and found that a “Condenser” improved the hearing distance of the Instrument. (This idea occurred to me some days ago — but we could not spare time to make a condenser — and did not know where to get one.) Prof. Rowland who called upon us yesterday independently suggested a condenser and spoke so highly of the idea from theoretical considerations that we determined to make the experiment with one. The large Induction coil I brought from England has a condenser inside it — so we opened the instrument and (part of letter missing) him of old — his florid complexion rather detracted from his appearance — by giving him the look of a man who indulged in good living — and who was accustomed to work in the open air.

There is none of that look about him now. His face is very pale — or rather it is of an ashen grey colour which makes one feel for a moment that you are not looking upon a living man. It made my heart bleed to look at him and think of all he must have suffered to bring him to this.

He lay upon his back with his head turned towards the screen. His eyes were closed — and a calm peaceful expression upon his countenance.

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I came to the conclusion that our wires must enter by the open door but this necessitated lengthening the wires so as to reach from window A right across to the surgeon's room into the hall or passage way.

One portion of the apparatus could be placed in the angle D and the exploring part of the Induction Balance with the telephone could be connected by wires long enough to reach easily to the President's bed.

Mr. Tainter and I set to work in the surgeon's room adding on the requisite lengths of wires and while we were in the midst of our preparations the President awoke and the doctors went in to dress the wound.

We found it difficult to adjust the balance so as to obtain silence. A spluttering sort of sound made its appearance and the hearing distance seemed to be impaired. I sent Mr. Tainter down to the basement to see whether the interrupter needed adjustment but before he could return the doctors beckoned me to enter the room — and the experiment had to be made with the apparatus just as it was. Dr. Bliss took the exploring coils and I listened at the telephone.

The screen had been removed and a gentleman knelt at the bedside supporting the President who had turned over on his side — resting his head upon the gentleman's shoulder and helping to support himself by clasping the gentleman round the neck. His head was so buried on the gentleman's shoulder that he could not see any person in the room. No one spoke a word during the experiment. I have tried to recall for your benefit the relative places of all the persons present so far as possible and you will find them noted in the enclosed drawing.

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You will see that from my position I was behind the President. The bedclothes were drawn on one side exposing the wounds and the body of the President as far as the thigh.

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Dr. Bliss moved the exploring coil from the wounds down the back beside the spine. I was rather surprised at this for I understood that they expected to find the bullet lodged in the wall of the abdomen somewhere in front. That (part of letter missing)

P. S. Private and confidential. Don't tell any one the contents. Alec.